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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000099

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TAGS: PGOV KDEM BG

SUBJECT: BANGLADESH LOCAL ELECTIONS A LETDOWN AFTER  
PARLIAMENT VOTE

REF: A. DHAKA 86

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Classified By: DCM Geta Pasi. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

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SUMMARY  
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¶11. (C) Bangladeshis voted for county-level officials for the first time in nearly two decades on January 22. Coming fast on the heels of a hugely successful Parliamentary election, the local vote attracted significantly less interest. Allegations of electoral fraud, intimidation and violence by Awami League supporters tarnished the party's pledge to improve governance after its overwhelming Parliamentary victory in December. A coalition of domestic observers nonetheless deemed the local elections "acceptable." The prospect of the elections improving political accountability through decentralized government will dim, however, should Members of Parliament vote themselves an advisory role over the local bodies as now appears likely.

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RELATIVELY LOW-KEY EVENT  
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¶12. (SBU) Less than a month after electing a new Parliament, Bangladeshis again headed to polls on January 22 to elect a chairman and two vice-chairmen to each of 481 upazillas, which are roughly equivalent to counties. (Note: One vice chairman seat was reserved for a woman in each upazilla. End note.) An unwillingness by successive Parliaments to water down their own highly centralized power was among the reasons the 2009 upazila vote was the first in almost 19 years. The Caretaker Government that ran Bangladesh in 2007-2008 after partisan political violence spun out of control insisted on resuming the local elections to make government more accountable. The Caretaker Government initially insisted the upazilla elections precede the Parliament elections to ensure newly elected lawmakers would not influence the local vote. It eventually reversed course under intense pressure from political parties.

¶13. (SBU) The Election Working Group (EWG), the main coalition of domestic observers, said in a news release issued just after the upazilla elections that voter turnout was low across the board. Five two-member teams of Embassy observers found the lengthy lines that marked the Parliamentary vote missing at many polling centers; a few had nary a voter present when observers arrived. The EWG cited a lack of interest in the local polls as a reason for the lower turnout; other observers cited intimidation of voters and inclement weather. The Election Commission on January 25 reported the upazilla election turnout was 71 percent, well beneath the 88 percent turnout of the Parliamentary election but still higher than what some monitors expected based on their election-day observations. Some local media reports suggested stuffing of ballot boxes accounted for the reported

turnout.

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VARIOUS FORMS OF ELECTORAL HANKY-PANKY...  
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¶ 14. (SBU) One Embassy observation team in southern Bhola district heard allegations that supporters of one Awami League candidate stuffed ballot boxes. Another observation team in northeastern Sylhet district heard allegations that supporters of an Awami League candidate chased a rival candidate from a polling station where he had been making allegations of electoral wrongdoing. The observation team returned to monitor the vote counting at the center, where the Awami League candidate won 87 percent of the vote in a field of nine. Newspapers reported other allegations of electoral fraud, including an account of a nude man standing in front of women voters at a polling center and stuffing the ballot box.

¶ 15. (SBU) Across the country, the Election Commission suspended voting at six upazillas because of partisan fighting. In one upazilla in Sirajganj district, voting was cancelled after election observers saw Awami League activists force opponents' agents from polling centers and demand voters mark their ballots openly. Awami League activists then ran amok, damaging the vehicle of an election observer from The Asia Foundation and injuring its driver. The Asia Foundation quoted eyewitnesses as saying law enforcement officials at the scene refused to intervene to stop the assault. Four days after the vote, newspapers reported the Election Commission had received more than 100 complaints of

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ballot stuffing, voter intimidation and other electoral wrongdoing.

¶ 16. (SBU) Awami League politicians were the target of many of the allegations of election misconduct. Local media focused on allegations that Fisheries and Livestock Minister Abdul Latif Biswas and Awami League lawmaker Abdur Rahman Bodi improperly tried to influence the upazilla elections, which were supposed to be non-partisan, in their constituencies. Their alleged misdeeds and those of other Awami League partisans embarrassed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who had promised to improve Bangladesh's notoriously poor governance. A January 25 front-page commentary in the influential newspaper The Daily Star said their actions "raised unnecessary doubts in the public mind as to how serious (Sheikh Hasina's) commitment is to bring 'change' in politics and governance." Awami League insiders told EmbOff that Hasina chastised the accused Minister and lawmaker but would not mete out any party punishment. The insiders claimed she would not interfere if the Election Commission were to take punitive action.

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... YET STILL AN 'ACCEPTABLE' ELECTION...  
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¶ 17. (C) Despite the problems, the Election Working Group said in a news release it believed the election was "acceptable" overall. Formal complaints were filed from only a fraction of the more than 32,000 polling centers. Embassy observers found the voting at most polling stations they visited smooth and uneventful with only minor hitches. The Embassy observation team in Sylhet ran into three senior law enforcement officials making the rounds of local polling centers, and each reported no untoward incidents. The Prime Minister's son, Sajeeb Wazed, told PolEcon Counselor on January 25 he considered the elections "the best that could have been expected."

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...BUT WILL IT MATTER?  
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¶8. (C) The big question going forward is how much power the newly elected upazilla officials will wield. The intent of upazilla elections, which were first introduced in the 1980s, was to dilute political power that was highly centralized in Parliament. The Caretaker Government fully supported the idea of reactivating upazilla elections to boost political accountability and transparency by keeping decision-making local. The new Awami League government, however, appears unwilling to end the traditional prerogative of lawmakers to hold great sway over all matters involving their constituencies. Reform-minded Local Government Minister Syed Ashraful Islam told the Ambassador that lawmakers in the new Awami League-dominated Parliament wanted to have an advisory role over upazillas in their constituencies (Reftel A). Should Parliament enshrine that advisory role in law, the upazilla elections could prove to be less a step toward better governance than a sign the Awami League was not as committed to political reform as it claimed before coming to power.

MORIARTY